

Missouri's Favorite Son: A Thomas Hart Benton Story

Bethany Christiansen

The graphic novel, "Missouri's Favorite Son: A Thomas Hart Benton Story," depicts a brief, imaginary episode in which a woman and her son encounter the artist Thomas Hart Benton while he paints his murals in the Missouri capital building. He shows them the sections that relate to Kansas City, educating them (as well as the reader) about the seedy, enterprising, and ever-resourceful midwest town during the Depression.

This project serves a three-fold purpose; firstly, it provides an historical sketch of this multi-faceted city in a new -- and hopefully, more engaging -- manner than the typical text book. But the graphic novel is more than a simple historical retelling; it serves as a brief look into Benton's conceptualization of what art can and should do. In the story, he says, "Art serves a function, just like a hammer or wrench. It records the history of the people." Later critics consider Benton as much an important social historian as a famous Regionalist artist. He reveals the mundane and the sordid, not only the majestic; in doing so, he "shows us Missourians as we really are," as Mrs. Collins says in the story.

The third aim of this graphic novel is to juxtapose two artistic styles -- that of comic art and mural art -- in order to compare the two. Comics and murals are essentially populist and accessible; both are deeply entrenched in the American art scene. These art forms also share the same downside -- they tend to lack vitality and sag toward the lowest common denominator: in an attempt to speak to everyone, they speak to no one. "Missouri's Favorite Son" is a subtle but pointed critique: the most effective art challenges us to expand, to grow, and to better understand ourselves as humans.

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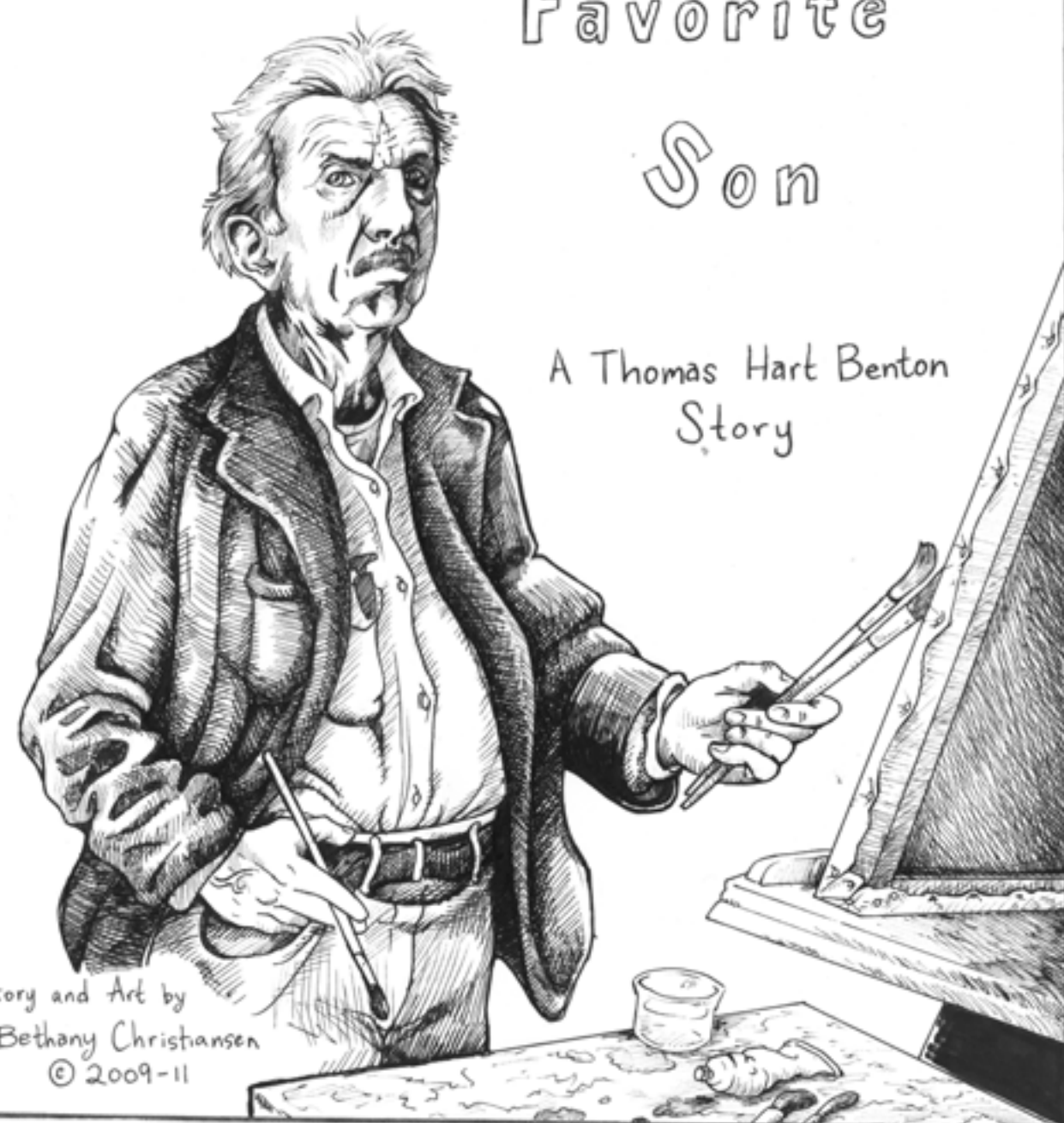
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Missouri's Favorite Son

A Thomas Hart Benton
Story



Story and Art by
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It's too damn hot.
I shouldn't have
to put up with
this.

